

Operation Riddle : 7 SIKH Action – Poonch Sector (Aug-Sep 1965)

Lieutenant Colonel Ravel Singh Sidhu (Retd)*

Background

Second Lieutenant (2/Lt) Ravel Singh Sidhu was commissioned into 7 SIKH on 27 Sep 1963. Pakistan had launched Operation Gibraltar in the first week of Aug 1965, wherein a large number of infiltrators supported by Mujahids were sent into the Kashmir Valley with the aim of carrying out sabotage followed by a general uprising; the ultimate aim being to annexe the State of J&K. After the tumultuous events of 1962, the security of India was once again threatened. At this juncture, 7 SIKH was located at Poonch and 2/Lt Ravel Singh Sidhu, though young in years, found himself in command of 'A' Company. In early August 1965, Ravel alongwith his company was located in the Mandi Valley which was a major scene of infiltration.

To give the reader a first hand feel of those momentous days, what follows is an account in 2/Lt Ravel's own words. Read on.....

Mandi Operation : 11-12 Aug 1965

In July 1965, I moved to the battalion HQ at Poonch and was appointed as the Mortar Platoon Commander. Infiltrators entered into the Indian side of J&K and started firing at the forward piquets on or about 1 August. Our Gali Piquet came under heavy fire on 7 August.

Approximately 40 infiltrators had entered Mandi valley and some of them had established themselves in the Mandir area of Mandi town cutting off 7 SIKH less two companies North of Mandi. Our 'A' and 'B' companies along with platoon less two sections of 3 Inch mortars under the overall command of Major KG Belliappa

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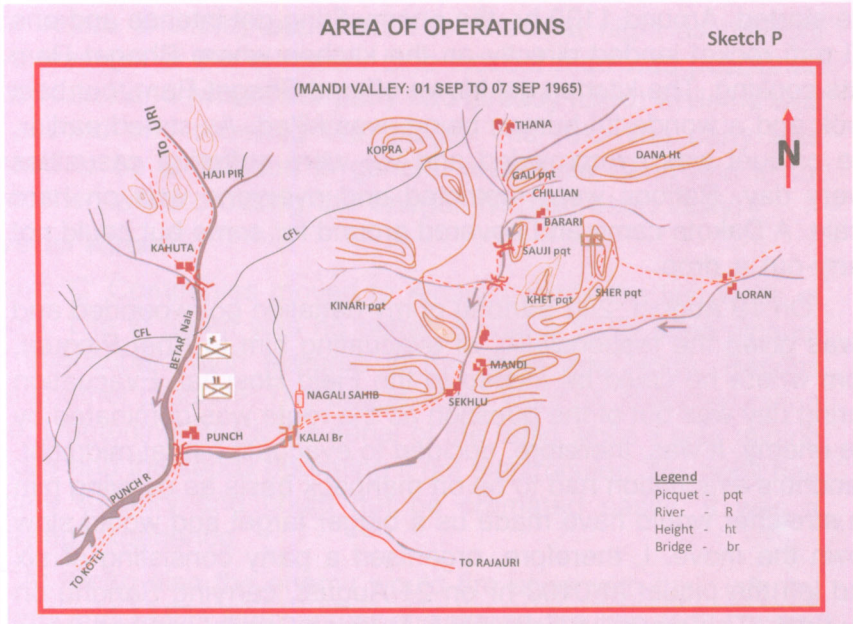
were moved to Sekhlu and placed under the operational command of 52 Mountain Brigade (Mtn Bde) on 09 August. On reaching there our troops found that Mandi town had been occupied by the infiltrators and the locals were fleeing from the area.

Early on the morning on 10 August, a civilian coming from Mandi brought me a chit written in Urdu from the commander of the Pakistani infiltrators located in Mandi town stating '*Hindustan ke afsaron ko hamara salam bolna, kehna ki ab hum kalai pe milenge*' (Convey my compliments to the Indian officers and tell them that we would now meet at the Kalai bridge). I took the slip to the Brigade Major (BM) Major Naidu as Major Belliappa was away on reconnaissance. Major Naidu took me along to meet Brigadier RD Hira, the Brigade Commander who asked me to engage the infiltrators.

My task was to engage the town with mortars while ensuring the safety of our own people. After selecting the mortar position, I left for reconnaissance of the objective.

On reaching the spur overlooking the whole town, I found that most of the civilians were concentrated on the southern side of the town and there was not much movement in the main town except some enemy activity near the Mandir. After reconnaissance I went to the BM and requested him that a message be sent across to the stranded civilians to move down along Mandi river as soon as they got a signal from me and to avoid coming back to Mandi town over the bridge.

I went ahead to the spur area and made my plan to engage the targets in a way that would reduce the risk of casualties to our own population. The mortar firing commenced at around 1000 hr on 12 August and was largely concentrated on the northern part of the town. At the same time, 'A' and 'B' Companies also started firing with their light machine guns (LMGs). The use of white phosphorous (WP) bursting ammunition along with smoke bombs not only started burning the northern half of the town but also created a smoke screen. I then asked the BM to instruct the civilians to pull out. On confirmation of their safe exit, mortar fire was brought down on the whole of Mandi town. By 1500 hr Mandi town, which was mostly built with timber, was aflame, thereby forcing the infiltrators who were in the town to flee for their lives. Having completed the task, we were asked to move forward and link up with the rest of the battalion in Sauji and other localities in that area. **Sketch P** refers.



Move to Sauji (Link up with the Battalion)

The troops began their move at First Light on 13 August. The advancing columns reached Sauji Picquet by last light the same day. This picquet which was a Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) Post had a capacity in terms of accommodation, rations and ammunition, including reserve stock, for a company strength for 30 days. With the arrival of fresh troops from Mandi the strength increased to a battalion less a company and the picquet became overcrowded. On 14 August, it was learnt that the Gali picquet had been overrun. The Commanding Officer (CO) 7 SIKH asked for artillery fire on Gali Picquet (own position) but it was out of artillery range. I then ordered the 3 Inch mortars to fire on the picquet. We fired about 200 rounds and the fire was effective.

Life at Sauji Picquet

Life at Sauji was quite interesting. Officers, JCOs and men were cramped up in small bunkers. The nights were very cold and since there were not enough blankets, 2/Lt Sandhu and I sharing a bed, managed to get a quilt from an abandoned hut close by. It was filthy, tattered and stinking but we had no option, except to use it.

On 19 Aug, the usual ritual of enemy machine gun and rocket fire started. Around 1130 hr, the enemy firing got intense and one 83 mm rocket landed directly on the kitchen where Bhagat Ram was cooking. The kitchen got blown off and Bhagat Ram, our best cook and a wonderful human being, was killed. As stated earlier, the picquet was overcrowded and we were suffering casualties every day. Rations were restricted and everyone was on hard scale. A Dakota came and hovered around for some but could not carry-out a drop.

On 19 August, 2/Lt Sandhu of my battalion got wounded and I was given the responsibility of evacuating him to Khet Picquet, from where he could be moved to the Field Hospital. Evacuation during day was out of the question as the route was dominated by the enemy. It was, therefore, decided to evacuate him at midnight. Sandhu's evacuation had to be on manpack basis as carrying him on stretcher would have made us a bigger target and would slow down the move. I, therefore, organised a party consisting of six and left the piquet at 0100 hr on 21 August, carrying Sandhu on my back. The move was downhill. At times Sandhu walked while at other times the party took turns in carrying him. While resting after reaching the East side of Sauji Bridge, one of the party walked into a deserted house and returned with a lathi. That stick was good support while walking with Sandhu on our backs and for Sandhu when he was himself walking. Having crossed the bridge, we halted about 200 metres southwest of the bridge. Our move while carrying a casualty through an enemy dominated area had to be stealthy, silent and by bounds and it took five hours to cover an hour's distance. Moving cautiously, the party reached the Khet Piquet by about 0600 hr on 21 August. Sandhu was by now in agony and had a thick white deposit around his lips. He promised to return soon but unfortunately breathed his last in the Field Hospital.

Escape from Ambush

After a short break at Khet Picquet, the party decided to move back to Sauji. Moving through the enemy dominated area during day was full of risk. The party came across one Razakar on the Nala Bend and shot him dead. Another Razakar, who was hiding on the far end of Sauji Bridge, was taken by surprise by us and hit on the head with the lathi. He fell unconscious. We took him to a safe place, revived him and began interrogating him. He told us that they knew that a party with a wounded person had gone the

night before and they expected it to return at night as daylight move was out of the question. One lookout man was positioned at the Nala Bend (whom our party had already killed) while he was the second one covering the bridge. The returning party was planned to be ambushed in general area Nala Bend and if not there, then while crossing the bridge. We had been lucky!

Move to Kinari

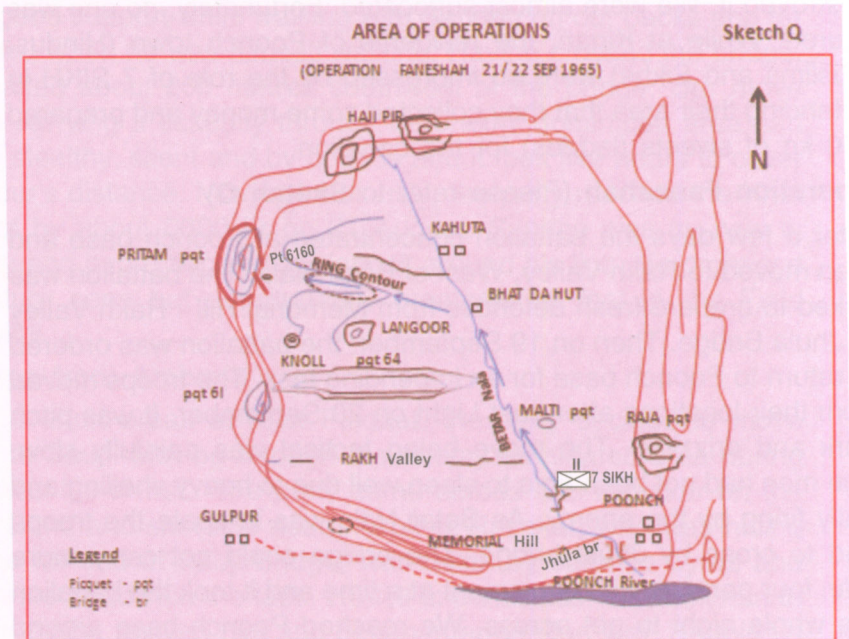
'B' and 'C' Companies moved to Kinari towards the last week of August. Life in Kinari was no better. It was a badly sited picquet with unoccupied high features in the West and North. Rations were another problem. The troops again went on restricted ration scale. Lightening struck the aerial of the radio while it was raining one day and the sepoy operating it got electrocuted. His body had become rubbery and could not be cremated easily. It was a horrifying experience.

At Kinari also the enemy would fire at us with their infantry mortars and LMGs from across the cease fire line (CFL) every day. At about 1000 hr on 28 August, I and a few others were sitting in the Signal Exchange bunker when the enemy started firing. One mortar bomb fell directly on the roof of the bunker and destroyed it. We were almost suffocated. Fortunately, no one was injured. While at Kinari, the residents of Poonch town (Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs) were so impressed by the role of 7 SIKH in defending their area that they collected some money and prepared 300 kg of sweets (laddus) for the battalion.

Operation Faneshah (Please refer to Sketch Q)

After a few days the battalion concentrated at Poonch base and then moved to Rakh Valley, West of Betar Nala. The battalion was asked to prepare fresh defences from Memorial Hill - Rakh Valley to Jhula Bridge. Then on 19 September, the battalion was ordered to return to Poonch base for an impending task. The troops moved from their locations after Last Light on 20 September. It was pitch dark and drizzling. The move being tactical was painfully slow. The men had not been able to sleep well due to heavy shelling and daily firing by the enemy. As Betar Nala was in spate the troops had to cross by Jhula bridge. The bridge could not carry more than four persons with equipment at a time and it took the battalion the whole night to get across. We reached Poonch base around 0600 hr on 21 September. Everyone was fatigued and sleepy, and settled down for much deserved rest.

I had hardly slept an hour when the battalion received the warning order for an attack and the battle procedure started. The battalion Orders Group ('O' Gp) left for Malti Picquet for operational briefing at 0900 hr where the CO Lt Colonel Bhagat Singh gave out his orders on a hastily made sketch on a ground sheet. He told us that Governments of India and Pakistan had agreed to a cease fire, effective from midnight 21/22 Sep. We had been tasked to capture area East of Pritam Picquet to include Lahori Shah feature and adjoining spurs Knoll, Ring Contour and Point 6160 before First Light 22 September. 3/11 GR was to move ahead to capture area South of Haji Pir and establish contact with 1 PARA in Haji Pir. The CO said that the attacking troops could go lightly equipped as the cease fire would be effective before day break. He also said that according to information received from various sources there was hardly any enemy activity in the area of the objective and at the most the enemy could have one company group there. He ordered one section 3 Inch mortars, all eight Medium Machine Guns (MMGs) and one Browning Machine Gun (.50 BMG), (which was captured by 7 SIKH from Raja Picquet), to accompany the attacking force. Extra mortar ammunition was to be carried by college students from Poonch as they had volunteered to do so.



NOT TO SCALE

That night, the sky was overcast and by 2015 hr it started raining heavily. The visibility had been reduced to one yard. 70 student volunteers each carrying two 3 Inch mortar bombs also joined us. The battalion moved forward for the attack. 'C' Company, behind which the mortars were following, however lost its way and veered eastwards toward Raja Picquet instead of going North. The battalion halted and the company was pulled back and made to move towards Kahuta. Just short of Kahuta 7 SIKH got mingled with 3/11 GR.

Betar Nala which had to be crossed to reach the battalion's objectives was in spate and getting across it became impossible because of poor visibility and non-availability of any crossing expedients like captive ferries, ropeways etc.. The Nala became fordable only around 0730 hr on 22 September. The battalion then waded through it without any opposition from the enemy. Ring Contour was captured without opposition but 'C' Company, which was to capture Knoll, remained at Ring Contour itself. 'B' Company, which was reserve to 'C' Company and was to capture Point 6160 and CO's party also stayed put at the Ring Contour. The whole battalion was now concentrated in an area of about 300 x 300 yds; thus, becoming an ideal target for enemy retaliation. No one moved to capture the planned objectives. This inaction cost the battalion 150 dead and wounded. Everyone presumed that ceasefire had become effective from midnight. No patrols were sent out and no digging was done. In short, no re-organisation stage activities were undertaken by anyone.

The section of 3 Inch mortars with 100 High Explosive (HE) bombs was deployed along the outer ring on the eastern side of the Ring contour. The rest of the bombs had been dropped en route by the college boys who were unable to carry the awkward load. At 0930 hr the CO ordered me to re-deploy the mortars in the centre of the battalion location and prepare a fire plan. In the meantime, news reached us that the Anchor Observation Post (OP) Officer, Captain Lal Singh, had been killed and no artillery support was available through that OP. The Battery Commander (BC) then took a couple of shoots till another OP officer took on the task. After taking a few shoots the new OP officer got injured in the eye by enemy shelling.

Around 1100 hr the enemy started pounding the battalion area with heavy artillery and mortar fire. The enemy had also

occupied Point 6160 and Area Knoll putting 7 SIKH in a very vulnerable position. The troops began digging with pick axes, spades and whatever else, like bayonets and even mess tins that they could lay their hands on. Around 1230 hr two enemy companies came up from the North side and halted 200 to 300 yds from 7 SIKH defended area, adopted assault formation and shouted, '*Naara-e-Tadbir Allah-hu-Akbar.*' The Sikhs also replied with '*Jai Karaas*'. The battalion's reaction was passive on account of limited ammunition. Since the first line ammunition carried by the battalion with its self loading rifles (SLR) and the new sten guns would not have lasted more than 15-20 minutes, strict instructions had been issued to the troops to open fire only when the enemy was within range. The enemy however did not attempt to move forward to assault. After exchange of choicest Punjabi abuses they withdrew without firing a shot. No sooner had they reached a safe distance, their artillery and mortar fire resumed.

Fortunately, they did not fire airbursts which would have caused heavy casualties as the men were in the open. After half an hour of heavy artillery fire, the enemy again shouted war cries and threatened to attack us but did not close in. Thereafter, they withdrew and again brought down artillery fire resulting in heavy casualties to our troops. Captain AK Singh and his Medical Platoon were tireless and provided medical help to the casualties even under intense shelling.

By now Captain Surjit Singh (Adjutant) and N/Sub Makhan Singh had been killed and 2/Lt Dewinder Singh had been injured. I had made the fire plan as desired by the CO and was about to hand it over to him when another attack came. The CO ordered for mortars to open fire. After giving my orders for it, I began digging a slit trench with the help of Naik Buta Singh and a jawan. I suddenly heard the sound of a 4.2 Inch mortar bomb coming at us. I immediately put my arms around Naik Buta Singh and the other jawan and pulled them down. The bomb fell on the mortar ammunition about 5-6 ft away from us which caught fire. The three of us were almost buried in the trench with the loose mud around us and had to be pulled out. Nk Buta Singh was hit by a splinter on his right shin. The other jawan was also wounded and I was hit by splinters on my head and fell unconscious. I regained my consciousness sometime later (am not sure after how long). However, it was a unique experience and I felt that I had returned from the jaws of death.

Later, I went to look up 2/Lt Dewinder Singh. His left knee had been blown off and he was lying in the trench quietly. I cheered him up and gave him two grenades. I told him that permission for withdrawal had been sought and if it did not come through, then he should be ready to die fighting rather than fall into enemy hands. I promised to take him along with me if I lived to do so but if not then he should throw one grenade outside and the second one in his own trench so as not to fall alive in enemy hands. 22 September which was a Friday, was proving to be a 'Black Friday'.

The battalion was finally given permission to withdraw at about 1730 hr. We started moving down and met Captain Santosh Kumar and party on the way. It was already dark. The move was slow especially with Cheema on my back and the Mortar Platoon's heavy weapons and equipment. As we moved, we spotted Captain Surjit Singh's body lying in the open. We collected some men and tried to carry his body, but could not manage to carry a stiff dead body for more than 200 yds. Besides, every jawan was already overloaded. We, therefore, covered his face with a scarf, took his sten gun, saluted and left his body there and moved on with heavy hearts. Along with Cheema and his sten, I was also carrying my own sten gun and a rifle that I had picked up en route. Throughout the night 22/23 September, I carried three weapons and Cheema, with his arms tightly around my neck, on my back. Mercifully, there was no enemy ambush during this disorganised move. We reached the West bank of Betar Nala opposite Bhatt Da Hut at First Light on 23 September where we met the CO.

The remaining officers and men concentrated South of Kahuta in general area Bhatt Da Hut by about 0800 hr. All ranks were totally fatigued. Most of them had not slept for the last 72 hours and had also not eaten for the past 36 hours. During this period, Radio Pak Lahore kept announcing that 7 SIKH which had captured part of PoK territory had been forced to withdraw leaving behind their dead including the Adjutant of the battalion. It was extremely hurting and demoralising for a battalion which had done so well throughout the war.